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ABSTRACT

A study examined assessment of students in the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) systems in Australia with reference to moderation processes and the maintenance of standards. Data were obtained through a multiple case-study technique, using visits to six of the eight major TAFE systems; focus group interviews were held with selected stakeholders in the system. The study found that the six systems use different policies and procedures in the assessment of students. Both internal and external assessment is conducted, and there is no clear systematic effort by TAFE authorities for moderation and maintenance of standards in the training programs. The study revealed that current practices need to be revised because of the following: (1) the development of a major role in assessing and certifying the attainment of job skills along with the associated legal/industrial relations implications; (2) the formalization of articulation arrangements with higher education institutions; (3) the progress toward a national approach to the determination of training standards and certification requirements; (4) the assessment of competencies acquired rather than time spent on training as a basis for certification; (5) the balance between core competencies developed nationally and training designed to meet individual company requirements; and (6) the recognition and assessment of prior learning. The study recommended systematic moderation processes and maintenance of standards through policy action, professional development, networking, and support services to TAFE colleges. (18 references) (KC)

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ASSESSMENT AND MAINTENANCE OF STANDARDS IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION DOWN UNDER

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Perspective of the study

Australia is changing the way it trains and educates its workforce (Field, 1990). The key features of such changes are the development of national skills standards by employers, the creation of career paths for employees, the implementation of competency-based training, and the recognition of training across States. In addition, emphasis is being placed on the moderation of quality learning outcomes, on recognition of prior learning, and on efficiency. These factors can be expected to lead to a closer scrutiny of the maintenance of standards in the vocational training provided by Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges in Australia (National Training Board, 1991). The eight vocational training systems in Australia are diverse and they will have to ensure that they maintain moderation processes and standards to achieve quality learning outcomes at the college, state, and national levels (Kirby, 1990). The assessment of students is one of the key components that has immediate implications for the achievement of moderation and the maintenance of standards (Thompson & Pearce, 1990; Hayton, 1989).

Objective of the study

This paper examines the current condition of assessment of students in the TAFE systems in Australia with reference to moderation processes and the maintenance of standards. It describes the current assessment policies, procedures, practices and moderation processes, and makes suggestions for improving the maintenance of standards in Australian TAFE colleges.

Methodology and data source

A multiple case study technique (Yin, 1989) was undertaken to investigate the current condition of the assessment of students. Data were collected through visits to selected TAFE systems and TAFE colleges; and from the relevant literature (Navaratnam, 1991). Six of the eight major TAFE

systems were purposely selected for the case studies. Focus group interviews with selected college personnel, administrators in State Office, and with other stakeholders in the TAFE system were conducted to gain insights into the following: background information on each TAFE organisation; assessment policies; assessment procedures and methods; responsibilities concerning assessment of students; moderation and maintenance of standards; exemplary practices in the assessment of students; reporting of results to students; problems and tasks involved in maintaining standards in the assessment of students; current initiatives toward maintaining standards in assessment of students; and their implications for quality learning outcomes.

Findings

There are eight different TAFE systems representing all States and Territories in Australia and they are the major public providers of skills training required by the workforce. They account for approximately 70% of post-secondary education enrolments. Each State and Territory administers its own TAFE system. The Commonwealth contributes approximately 8% of total funds. TAFE colleges offer associate diploma, certificate, and other awards and also non-award courses. A number of TAFE colleges also offer secondary school subjects and English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students (ELICOS) courses. TAFE courses are developed in collaboration with industry and the community to ensure up-to-date education and training. The following paragraphs describe the assessment policies, procedures, processes, and the method of moderation and maintenance of standards in six TAFE system in Australia.

Queensland TAFE

TAFE in Queensland is administered by the Department of Employment, Vocational Education, Training and Industrial Relations (DEVETIR). DEVETIR provides services related to industrial relations; workplace health and safety; worker's compensation; and employment, and vocational education and training. Technical and Further Education, Training and Employment Queensland (TAFETEQ) of the DEVETIR is charged with delivery of vocational training in order to meet the Government's objectives for vocational education, training and employment in the context of social and economic development. More than 200,000 students enrol annually in 30 TAFE and 3 Senior Colleges.

With the introduction of College-Based Assessment (C-BAS) in 1978, TAFE colleges are responsible and accountable for developing and conducting their own assessment of students. In order to support the C-BAS process, TAFE colleges are encouraged to establish College Assessment Committees (CACs). In this way, colleges devise and administer both summative and formative assessment instruments at the classroom level without the need to refer to any external agency. In fact, the aims of C-BAS assessment are to: (1) improve standards of assessment in colleges, (2) assist teachers in the area of student assessment, (3) ensure appropriateness, adequacy, consistency, and reasonable coverage between curriculum and assessment, and (4) ensure a fair assessment of students. At present, central assessment is conducted only for those apprenticeship courses that involve licensing by external agencies. The agencies have a legislative authority to license graduates so that they can be employed in their trade areas.

The State Office, and more specifically the Division of Vocational Education and Training (DVET) is responsible for maintaining standards and consistency in all forms of assessment across the TAFE system. As a part of C-BAS, it is required to evaluate a 5% sample of C-BAS assessment instruments in various subjects from the preceding examination period with respect to their overall suitability, consistency with the approved syllabus, and comparability across colleges. DVET is also responsible for facilitating college-based peer evaluations for another 5% sample of examination papers or assessment instruments for a selected group of subjects. The matters to be considered in these evaluations include: format/presentation, instructions to students, guidance to markers, weighting of marks, appropriateness of instrument, question suitability, coverage of subject content, degree of difficulty, question construction, completion time, and purpose. Thus, these two types of evaluations are scheduled to be conducted each semester and reported annually to give guidance on assessment to teachers and to maintain assessment standards in vocational education and training.

Victorian TAFE

The State Training Board (STB) of Victoria is a statutory authority responsible for the State Training System (STS). The Office of the State Training Board (OSTB), a Public Service unit within the Ministry of Education, is responsible for administering the STS. The STB enables TAFE colleges to propose ways in which they may meet training needs. The TAFE colleges are autonomous agencies within the STS and are governed by College Councils. There are 32 TAFE colleges and 16 other facilities, and over 260,000 students are enrolled in them.

There are 18 TAFE colleges which are described as "Designated Providers", responsible for the statewide management and development of curriculum for a specific industry or field of study. The Designated Providers work in close consultation with the relevant Industry Training Board and establish Management Committees consisting of representatives from relevant providers and the STB to ensure that the development of training programs is in accordance with industry's priorities and Government policy. The Examinations Branch within the STB is responsible for conducting external examinations while internal examinations are the responsibility of TAFE colleges. Designated Colleges make major contributions to curriculum development, the accreditation of courses, and the assessment of students.

With reference to the internal assessment of students in Victoria moderation, and the maintenance of standards seem to be major concerns. There is little evidence that there are specific mechanisms in place for moderation or the maintenance of standards in internally assessed subjects. Major strengths in the assessment of students in the Victorian State Training System as identified by the staff include: the strong central system of assessment in many subjects; well-organised moderation of curriculum content and assessment instruments for externally-assessed subjects; and the operation of test banks for many externally-assessed subjects.

South Australian TAFE

The South Australian Department of Technical and Further Education (DETAFE) consists of eight major divisions: administration and finance, planning and systems, curriculum services, human resources, program division, physical resources, employment and training, and youth affairs. The Curriculum Services Division manages five broad statewide functions: provision of policy and procedural advice, development and review of courses, approval and accreditation of award courses, maintenance of course standards, development of learning and resources, and delivery systems.

DETAFE offers about 300 award courses and many other short courses and individual subjects through a network of 20 colleges, 13 metropolitan and 7 country, and many other teaching centres. DETAFE provides courses for about 100,000 students. There are 19 educational programs and each has a Course Standard Group (CSG) and a Program Group (PG). Course Standards Groups consist of six members, including not less than one from the relevant Program Group, at least one who is not a member of the PG, and one from Curriculum Services

Division. Course Standards Groups are established to monitor and make recommendation to improve the standards in TAFE courses and across the colleges.

Program Groups are organised to plan and develop the delivery of TAFE courses efficiently and effectively. The PG is responsible for the Program Planning Management Committee and it is expected that it might take over the responsibilities with regard to maintenance of standards in TAFE courses in the near future. The Program Management Committee is made up of the College Directors. The PG is considered to be a more powerful body than the CSG. The PG conducts its meetings monthly while the CSG meets only at the end of the examination periods. These two groups are program specific and independent of each other in terms of their activities and responsibilities. Thus they do not hold a common meeting. Similarly, statewide meetings are conducted separately to monitor the activities of the each group in relation to their responsibilities.

College-based assessment is mainly used for award courses and central assessment is used only in a very few courses. Subject advisers take major responsibility for the design, development, and conduct of assessments. The major features of the central assessment process are the use of marking schedules, marking keys, and marking in a central place by teachers teaching those subjects. The major strengths of the maintenance of standards in the assessment process is in the functioning of the CSGs and PGs in each of the major program areas. In addition, there is a commitment by the colleges and the Curriculum Services Division in terms of resources for maintaining standards and quality in the provision of TAFE programs.

Western Australian TAFE

The Department of Technical and Further Education (DTAFE), Western Australia, consists of 12 metropolitan campuses, five regional TAFE colleges, 7 regional centres and about 110 TAFE centres throughout Western Australia. All TAFE colleges are open for up to 50 weeks a year. The Central Office has been restructured to give effect to a central focus on policy formulation, planning, resource co-ordination, and curriculum integration. Thus, the new administrative management for service delivery in TAFE provides for a stronger regional approach. A Board of Directors represents the major policy formulation group in TAFE. The management and administrative model includes strong representation from the delivery system to ensure that the College Directors are contributors to the decision-making process. There are about 130,000 students enrolled in the TAFE colleges.

The Western Australian Government has established the State Employment and Skills Development Authority (SESDA) in conjunction with the restructuring of the DTAFE. SESDA is overseeing the direction of TAFE and its delivery. It is responsible for developing policy relating to training in Western Australia through a network of Industry Employment and Training Councils (IETCs) and the Skill Standards and Accreditation Board (SSAB). The IETCs provide information to the SESDA concerning the skill formation priorities of industry groups. It is responsible for coordinating advice to government and to industry on issues relating to skill standards, skill formation needs and priorities, and equal opportunity in access to skill formation programs. SSAB is responsible for quality control in the training programs conducted in Western Australia, the accreditation of skill formation programs and the accreditation of an individual's skills. SSAB also monitors State and national training standards.

The Designated Colleges and the Study Area Consultants are responsible for conducting external examinations while internal examinations are the responsibility of TAFE campuses. Designated Colleges make major contributions to curriculum development, the accreditation of courses, and the assessment of students. The Study Area Consultant's duties include monitoring the examination process and standards, nominating examiners, co-examiners and co-ordinating examiners. However, moderation and the maintenance of standards seem to be major concerns to the administrators of the TAFE system. There is no clear functional direction with regard to moderation and the maintenance of standards in the WA TAFE system. Major strengths in the assessment of students in the WA TAFE system include the use of Study Area Consultants, networking by study areas, central examinations, and the development and use of common instruments for internal assessment in some study areas.

New South Wales TAFE

The New South Wales Department of Technical and Further Education is responsible for vocational training in that State. The Training Divisions (TDs) have 10 Industry Training Divisions (ITDs) and 3 Education and Training Divisions (ETDs). The staff of an ITD includes a Chief, an Industry Specialist, a Cluster Manager, a Marketing Manger, a Curriculum Manager, a Curriculum Coordinator, a Quality Assurance Coordinator, and support staff. The ITD structure consists of several industry sectors and thus is the focal point for interaction with industry. TAFE training provision for each sector of industry is managed by industry specialists. The major functions of the Industry Specialists include: liaison and consultation with industry, management of the development, review, evaluation and accreditation of all statewide courses, provision of curriculum documents and assessment schedules to colleges and networks, planning and

implementing quality assurance, assistance with human resource development, assisting colleges with the development of curriculum, ensuring course articulation arrangements, and providing strategic learning advice.

The primary responsibility of TDs is to plan, co-ordinate and contract the production of curricula in line with forecasts of national and state skill needs and in response to local industry requirements identified by colleges and networks as well as by the ITDs themselves, setting requirements, planning, establishing course content, coordinating and overseeing, curriculum development, and evaluating state-wide outcomes. ITDs are responsible for ensuring that all TAFE courses such as basic, preparatory and access programs, trade and para-professional courses, conform to needs criteria, quality standards and agreed outcomes in terms of competency standards, resulting in student satisfaction and employer satisfaction. Thus, ITDs will set quality specifications for teaching staff, course content and resources and will assist colleges in their quality control activities.

TAFE colleges have been grouped into networks and all the networks placed into three major network groupings, according to the specific geographical areas they serve. The major responsibilities of the Network Managers are to ensure that: support services to colleges are adequate and appropriate to achieve agreed educational outcomes and financial targets; resources across member colleges in the Networks are used in the most effective way; quality control standards are consistent across member colleges, and colleges implement appropriate staff selection and promotion procedures and practices.

The Assessment Research and Development Unit (ARDU) within the Curriculum Policy Division is responsible for conducting external examinations while internal examinations are the responsibility of TAFE colleges. Industry Training Divisions set quality specifications for teaching staff, course content and resource use. There are four categories of courses: centrally approved, school approved, college approved, and outreach course approval. Syllabus documentation for the centrally approved and school the approved courses requires a specific summary of assessment statements and practices. The other two categories of courses are not formally assessed. Examination specifications gives details of what should be tested in an examination. A review of marks and results is carried out at the college and at the central office level. The maintenance of standards in the assessment of students begins with the syllabus document and it is conducted by the ARDU.

ACT Institute of TAFE

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Institute of TAFE operates from three major teaching campuses in Canberra: Bruce, Reid, and Woden. There are five other small campuses providing various specialised programs. The Institute has three major administrative structures: an Education Delivery Program, an Education Program, and a Corporate Services Program. There are nine teaching schools within the Education Delivery Program, four units within the Education Program, and five units within the Corporate Services Program. There are about 20,000 enrolments in 1991. There is no duplication of courses and related services by the campuses.

The assessment of students within the Institute is school-based. Assessors and co-assessors take major responsibilities for the design, development, and conduct of assessments. As a part of the assessment process, an assessment plan is developed prior to the commencement of teaching. The major features of the assessment plan is the use of marking schedules and marking keys. Use of the marking scheme and marking keys and the provision of information about them to students at an early stage of enrolment in the subject are considered to contribute to exemplary practice. The major strengths of the assessment process conducted by the Institute, as identified by the staff, include: the use of a current assessment policy and guidelines, use of an assessor and co-assessor for the design, development, and conduct of assessment, and the preparation and use of an assessment plan and information to students about it in advance.

Educational importance of the study

The six TAFE systems described above all use different policies and procedures in the assessment of students. A combination of both internal (college-based) and external (central) assessment of students is conducted by them. There is no clear systematic effort by TAFE authorities for moderation and the maintenance of standards in their training programs. This study revealed that the current assessment of students and maintenance of standards need to be revised for a variety of reasons. Some of the major reasons include: (i) the development of a major role in assessing and certifying the attainment of on-the-job and off-the-job competencies along with the associated legal/industrial relations implications; (ii) the formalisation of articulation arrangements with higher education institutions; (iii) the progress towards a national approach to the determination of training standards and certification requirements; (iv) the assessment of competencies acquired rather than time spent on training as a basis for

certification; (v) the balance between core competencies developed nationally and training designed to meet individual company requirements; (vi) the recognition (and assessment) of prior learning; and (vii) Freedom-of-Information legislation.

Variations in the organisation and administration of the TAFE systems as well as in the policies and processes adopted in the assessment of students lead to few commonalities in the maintenance of standards among them. Thus, it is not possible to make rational comparisons of moderation and maintenance of standards in the assessment of students. This study also revealed that there is little exemplary practice in the assessment of students that can be emulated by others. However, the findings of this study offer several insights and propositions concerning the maintenance of standards in the assessment of students and the achievement of quality learning outcomes.

Specifically, this study recommends systematic moderation processes and maintenance of standards through policy action, professional development, networking, and support services to TAFE colleges. It also suggests that all stakeholders in TAFE systems across the nation must take corrective action to overcome the failure of the current system to respond to moderation and the maintenance of standards. Although some TAFE systems are taking initiatives toward this end, the rate of implementing moderation and maintenance of standards in the assessment of students needs acceleration. TAFE authorities must improve the process of course development, thus facilitating moderation and maintenance of standards. During the past couple of years, different TAFE systems in Australia have invested considerable amounts of human and material resources in improving the organisational and operational effectiveness and efficiency of the provision of vocational education. The result has been some lack of attention to the quality of learning outcomes in TAFE colleges. The time has come, and it is the right time, to make substantial efforts toward moderation and maintenance of standards in the assessment of students and in turn in the provision of vocational education.

Considering current developments in vocational education and training, the maintenance of standards in internally assessed subjects is vitally important to keep pace with the national initiatives. For this reason, customer oriented quality improvement approaches must be used. Customers of vocational education and training are sufficiently astute to be able to differentiate between poor and good quality training and services provided to them. They are rational decision makers and they have certain needs and expectations about training programs, and other services. They compare the TAFE systems, colleges, courses, and graduates with one another.

Establishing an effective quality assurance or Total Quality Management (TQM) process in a TAFE system is a complex and a sizeable undertaking. The introduction of quality concepts into vocational education and training requires new directions in the management and delivery of TAFE courses. Considerable commitment by management and increased resources are required to do it well and to ensure its continuity. Moreover, what is important is to develop a customised quality assurance process that is relevant and practically feasible for the specific conditions of each of the TAFE organisations.

Moderation, maintenance of standards, and quality of learning outcomes cannot be achieved through improvement in the assessment of students alone. There is a need for system-wide improvement that should be developed in every component in the process of the delivery of the education and training, including curriculum development, teaching methods and strategies, staff development, involvement of industry, development of standards, management strategy, and implementation of programs and policy. Quality concepts can be applied and need to be applied to achieve quality learning outcomes through making self-sustained improvements in the whole provision of the vocational education and training down under.

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